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TAGS: PGOV PHUM IS

SUBJECT: 150 PEOPLE LEFT HOMELESS AFTER NEW ROUND OF HOME DEMOLITIONS IN THE NEGEV

Classified By: PolCouns Marc Sievers for reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (U) In the year's first major demolition operation in the Negev, the GOI on June 25 demolished 28 structures (mostly homes) in the unrecognized Bedouin villages of A-Tir and Um Al-Hiran -- a pair of villages with a population of about 2200 in the northern Negev desert. According to press accounts, Interior Ministry officials -- backed by approximately 1500 police officers and IDF soldiers -- entered the villages unannounced at around 8:00 a.m. to execute demolition orders issued by the Be'er Sheva District Court in 2004 at the behest of the Israel Land Administration (ILA). Planning documents obtained by the Arab-Israeli rights NGO Adalah show that in 2002, the GOI approved an ILA plan to establish a new Jewish town named "Hiran" on the site currently occupied by A-Tir and Um Al-Hiran (which, being unrecognized, do not appear on any Israeli maps).

¶2. (U) A bulletin issued June 25 by the UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that at least 150 people were made homeless by the operation in A-Tir/Um Al-Hiran. OCHA observers reported that police confiscated the possessions of occupants and would not let them enter their homes to retrieve personal belongings prior to the demolitions. Faisal Sawalha of the RCUV told poloff June 28 that, in a departure from past practice, the GOI was this time refusing to return the belongings of people whose homes were demolished until they paid a fee meant to offset the cost of the demolition itself.

¶3. (C) Sawalha also noted that the radical leader of the Israeli Islamic Movement's Northern Branch, Sheikh Ra'ed Salah, visited the demolition site June 28 and was providing a large amount of aid to the evicted residents. Additional assistance is being provided by the more moderate Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement. Sawalha commented with alarm that radical figures like Salah were gaining influence among some Bedouin communities because they provide social services to these underserved villages. They also provide high-visibility assistance in times of crisis, such as after demolitions, earning them respect and gratitude in places where respect for the state is steadily declining.

Background: Twice Removed

¶4. (U) The residents of A-Tir/Um Al-Hiran belong to the Al-Qi'an family that has resided in the Negev region since before the establishment of Israel. According to tribal leaders, the family lost its ancestral land as a consequence of the 1948 war. In 1956, while still under martial law, the IDF resettled the Al-Qi'an family in their current home at A-Tir/Um Al-Hiran, where they have since remained. In 2004, the ILA obtained an evacuation order against A-Tir and Um Al-Hiran on the basis that their Bedouin residents were illegally occupying state land. As a result, some residents entered into negotiations with the ILA over relocation

packages that would involve some financial compensation and a government-sponsored move to a new Bedouin community currently under development. According to the RCUV and Adalah, the negotiations were on the verge of a successful outcome just prior to the demolitions.

Bedouin Snapshot

¶5. (U) About half of Israel's 160,000 Bedouin residents of the Negev, a majority of whom are Israeli citizens, live in 37 unrecognized villages, which the GOI argues are illegally situated on state-owned land. The other half reside in seven towns built by the government in the 1970s and 1980s in an attempt to consolidate them. Residents of the unrecognized villages are legally required to pay taxes and often serve in the military, although they receive no state services such as water, electricity, health care or education. The seven recognized Bedouin towns do receive state services, although at a generally substandard level. They are also the poorest communities in Israel and have the country's highest rates of crime and unemployment. During the tenure of former PM Ariel Sharon, the GOI approved plans to construct seven new official Bedouin towns, although none has yet been completed.

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JONES